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SUBJECT: IRAN: ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTION UPDATE

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: The next election in Iran to replace the members of the Assembly of Experts -- the group responsible for choosing the Supreme Leader and with the power to depose him -- is scheduled for sometime in summer-fall 2006. Debate on logistical issues related to the election has surfaced in Iran, but it looks unlikely that any change to past practice will occur in this round. Nonetheless, these public challenges are noteworthy because they demonstrate that the reformists retain some ability to pressure the leadership. All will be watching to see if conservatives dominate these elections as they have the most recent municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections, and the impact on the supposed power struggle between Ayatollahs Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and Mesbah-Yazdi. End summary

Proposed Amendments

2.(SBU) The Assembly of Experts is composed of 86 religious scholars (mujtahid), directly elected for eight-year terms, with the next election forecasted for summer 2006. This assembly elects the Supreme Leader and has the power to depose him. There is currently in Iran debate over four issues related to the next round of elections: 1) combining them with the next round of municipal elections to save money; 2) the degree of power the Council of Guardians should have in assessing whether potential candidates meet the definition of religious scholar; 3) whether non-religious members should be added to the Assembly, given the fact that it is supposed to apply both non-religious as well as religious criteria to select a Supreme Leader; and 4) whether women can run. Any amendments to the rules of the assembly have to be passed by the assembly itself. The first issue -- a combined election -- is the most likely of the four to be adopted in the near future, but probably not in time to impact this round.

Combining Elections

3.(S) The Interior Ministry is considering a proposal to combine Assembly of Expert elections with the next local elections, presumably for cost-cutting purposes. The ministry is also considering combining future presidential and parliamentary elections. According to a former MFA official who attended several meetings on this issue, each election costs approximately \$10 million for the Interior Ministry and \$10 million for the Council of Guardians to administer. There has been no decision yet, and the Interior Ministry, according to

Iranian press reports, would not make the decision without consulting with the Assembly of Experts. If approved in the very near future, press reports project the combined election would be held January-March 2007, effectively delaying the Assembly of Experts vote until next year. The Interior Minister's deputy for parliamentary and legal affairs was quoted praising the proposal as reducing both financial expenditures and -- interestingly -- "political tensions." Most reformist political parties have opposed the idea, according to the reformist press. The former MFA official told PolEconChief he doubted the idea would pass, in part because the Iranian government likes to tout the fact that it holds an election approximately every year. Also, he added, bureaucratically it would be complicated, given that the Assembly of Experts would have to ratify its portion of the revision, while the Majles would have to ratify the portions related to municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections.

Objections to the Council of Guardians' Role

4.(U) According to press reports, former presidential candidate -- and head of the new National Confidence political party -- Mehdi Karroubi recently proposed to Assembly of Experts Speaker Ali Akbar Meshkini that the Assembly of Experts take away from the Council of Guardians its vetting role in the elections. The Council of Guardians currently has exclusive responsibility for verifying candidates' status as religious scholars, giving it vetting powers similar to those it has in other elections. Karroubi proposed that the endorsement of two sources of emulation (marja-e taqlid) should suffice. Karroubi was recently quoted in the Iranian press saying that the review of qualifications for the Assembly of Experts candidates should be more open, "meaning for different ideologies to be able to take part in the elections within the Constitution, and for there to be no restrictions on the ideologies and tendencies like before."

5.(U) Mussavi Tabrizi, a leader within the reformist faction of the Assembly of Experts, reportedly proposed a motion to reduce this power of the Council of Guardians but it failed in

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committee.

6.(U) Abdolvahed Musavi-Lari of the reformist Militant Clerics Society was quoted in the Iranian press as saying that if vetting is "personal, factional, or exclusionary," the group probably will not participate. He said those in charge of supervising the election should not reject candidates without having a [legally defensible] reason or approve of candidates who are not competent. On the other hand, Secretary General Gholam Hussein Karbaschi of the more centrist Executives of Construction Party (and mayor of Tehran before Ahmadinejad) stated publicly their party would field candidates for the Assembly of Experts, as well as launch a newspaper soon.

Opening Membership to Non-Clerics?

7.(U) Karroubi also reportedly raised with Meshkini the issue of allowing people other than religious scholars to run for the Assembly of Experts, according to reports in the Iranian press. The argument is that the Supreme Leader has responsibilities other than religious ones -- issues related to the military or governance, for example -- and that therefore other types of experts should be involved in the selection process. The Constitution says the Supreme Leader should meet non-religious criteria like sound political and social insight, management and leadership ability.

8.(S) Assembly of Experts member and senior member of the Militant Clerics Society Majid Ansari reportedly drafted a plan proposing that one third of the seats would go to individuals proficient in areas outside of religion related to the Supreme Leader's responsibilities. However, other members of the assembly have told the press that this plan was unofficial, not serious, and unlikely to succeed if brought up for

consideration. The former MFA official cited above, who is reportedly close to Rafsanjani, predicted that if Rafsanjani thought that opening up membership of the Assembly of Experts would help him, he would push for it, but the official doubted the measure would pass.

9.(SBU) The spokesman for the Council of Guardians, Abbas Ali Kadkhoda'i, was quoted in the press as denouncing the concept of expanding membership, but later (likely after being chastised for stepping beyond the parameters of the Council of Guardians' area of responsibility) qualified his statement as his own opinion. He said he believed it was unconstitutional but clarified that the Council of Guardians would apply such a rule if approved by the Assembly of Experts. (Note: The Iranian constitution is clear that the Supreme Leader himself must be a religious scholar, but is apparently less explicit when it comes to membership in the Assembly of Experts.)

What about Women?

10.(U) There have never been women members of the Assembly of Experts, but just as in the case of the 2005 presidential election, there is some questioning of this status quo in the press. One recent Iranian article quoted Ayatollah Yazdi saying "There is no lawful bar to women becoming members of the Assembly of Experts. However, we have no women that qualify, and no female religious scholars." The writer disagreed that there are no female religious scholars and went on to conclude that by expanding membership in the Assembly of Experts to non-religious scholars, one would in any event eliminate this excuse for excluding women. To support his argument for inclusion of women, the writer quotes the late Supreme Leader Khomeini: "Women also must be shoulder to shoulder with men in social and political activities."

11.(C) An Iranian political and economic analyst recently echoed the writer's sentiments to PolEconChief, claiming that there are actually women mujtahids currently teaching in Qom. Therefore, he said, women can in theory already stand for election; he doubted, however, that any could win.

Comment

12.(C) None of these reforms is reportedly on the agenda of the March 7-8 Assembly of Experts meeting. Since that is slated to be the Assembly's last meeting prior to new elections this summer, none of the proposed reforms seem likely to be implemented in the short term. Part of upcoming session, including a speech by Meshkini, will be public, and part will be closed. The reform most likely to eventually be adopted is the first -- combining Assembly of Experts election with municipal elections -- but even that seems unlikely to impact this round.

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According to one Iranian source who works with UNDP in Tehran, the Islamic Republic "has never yet postponed an election."

13.(S) The UNDP official commented that Karroubi, by merely raising such issues, is putting a lot of pressure on the system. The official, educated in the U.S. where he lived for 15 years, commented that overall there has been a "quantum change" in Iran in recent years in terms of political development. While the path itself is something of a zigzag, the overall direction, he believes, is positive.

14.(C) There are rumors that Rafsanjani and/or Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi will try to use this Assembly of Experts election to facilitate their own takeover of the position of Supreme Leader, by ensuring their supporters win a majority. One contact claimed recently that Khamenei fears such a coup is brewing and intends to put Mesbah-Yazdi and Ahmadinejad back in their boxes, but only after they fulfill his first priority of squashing Rafsanjani. In this contact's view, however, Khamenei overestimates his ability to control

Mesbah-Yazdi and Ahmadimejad. Iranian contacts have numerous theories on this issue which we will continue to report, but it remains unclear from the outside how serious this jockeying is.
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